

Just a Dream Until it Comes

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Category: Downton Abbey

Genre: Family, Romance

Language: English

Characters: Dr. Clarkson, Isobel C.

Pairings: Isobel C./Dr. Clarkson

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2016-04-07 18:41:35

Updated: 2016-04-07 18:41:35

Packaged: 2016-04-27 21:18:28

Rating: K+

Chapters: 1

Words: 1,756

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Doctor Richard Clarkson has finally found what he never realized he was looking for. An introspective look at the married lives of Richard and Isobel. AU that incorporates canon elements. Sequel to Worthy and True. Rating subject to change.

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A/N: Hello all! It's been a little while since I've written anything purely Richobel. While pondering options for the direction of Vita, Dulcedo, Spes, a new idea came to life. I envision it as a sequel to Worthy and True. VDS is the main focus of my writing at the moment, but this just wouldn't leave me alone! I'm afraid to detail exactly what I see for this, because it's all subject to a very persnickety muse, but I anticipate a handful of chapters. Perhaps more ... who knows? And I also expect the rating to increase but as to exactly when, well ... we shall see!

Many thanks to the lovely brenna-louise for beta.

A review or two would set me up forever. Thank you most kindly for reading.

xx,

~ejb~

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><p>Life is profound in its simplicity these days. The life and love in which Richard has found himself immersed are a far cry from anything he might have pictured, but then â€| had he ever truly stopped, in the hustle and bustle of running a hospital, to consider that there could be anything else?<p>

He hadn't. His life had, for decades, consisted of serving the community, safeguarding the health of lords and baronets, of cooks and grooms alike. As such, despite the village's small size, he was never without something to do - a baby to deliver, a broken bone to set, an elderly patient in need of companionship in their final hours. Even when he was off the clock there were journal articles to read, research to be done. He entertained himself in those days with a cricket match here, a journey back home to Edinburgh there. It was a good life, a satisfying life, and he was content - until, one day, he wasn't.

He'll never forget the date: 10 September 1912. A typical Tuesday by all accounts. With the wheat harvest underway there had been an uptick in the number of threshing-related injuries among the farmhands, but otherwise it was business as usual. While he was not keen on gossip, he couldn't help but overhear the buzz among the nurses and orderlies about the new arrivals from Manchester: the young solicitor, heir presumptive to the earldom of Grantham, and his mother, widow of the esteemed Doctor Reginald Crawley. He knew of Crawley's work in the treatment of infectious disease and had once heard him lecture on the subject at a conference in London.

He could never have supposed, however, that Crawley's widow would breeze into his hospital and, full of bravado and insolence, assert that they, he and she together, perform pericardiocentesis on his dropsy patient. She had assisted her husband in performing the procedure several times, she'd explained, and the results were remarkable. His ire was raised instantaneously. Who was this woman?! He had capitulated to her insistence because, truth be told, all signs pointed to Mr. Drake's demise regardless of the treatment. What could it hurt?, he reckoned. To this day, the image of her finely-manicured hand holding the vial of adrenaline is seared into his conscience. He had told her with full candor, "Well, Mrs. Crawley, I have a feeling we will sink or swim together." For as much as she had infuriated him, something shifted for Richard that day. It was as if the missing piece of a puzzle had finally been located.

When had he realized it was love, that altogether unfamiliar sensation that plagued him anytime she was near, and even when she was not? Oh, he had an inkling straightaway that it was more than simply desire, though she was indeed beautiful, with her caramel-colored waves and wide, soulful brown eyes and skin that evoked in him feelings of warmth, even in the dead of winter. He supposes it was during the war years, when the two of them worked side by side round the clock, becoming so attuned to the other that the bulk of their communication was silent. Watching him roll his shoulders and pinch the bridge of his nose after twelve straight hours on his feet would lead her to bring him a cup of tea with a reassuring squeeze to his forearm. We're making a difference here, her eyes seemed to tell him. You can do this. It's just a little longer. _

Unspoken communication began to express itself in spontaneous gestures of kindness on his part as well. He had observed from his office window one spring morning as she came into work the way she stopped and knelt to smell the daffodils growing along the walkway. Before her next shift he'd paid a visit to the village florist, filling three large vases full of the yellow blooms and leaving them, anonymously, on her desk. Anything to bring her joy, he'd thought.

Anything to see that smile, particularly with her son on the battlefield far from home. And smile she had! He watched her make her rounds that day as if floating on a cloud, humming softly to herself. Another date he'd remember always: 27 March, 1916. The day Doctor Richard Clarkson realized he was in love with Nurse Isobel Crawley.

While that love would take some time to come full circle, their friendship grew deeper and more profound with each passing year. He was the one she would run to with news, the one from whom she sought counsel. He was the only one who knew that, despite her impervious exterior, there were times when going toe-to-toe with the Dowager Countess left her ragged. He'd discovered this rather by accident one evening when, at the close of his shift, he stepped into the office for his coat and hat and found her there, sitting upon the cot he kept for the times he could not make it home. He knew something was amiss because it was her day off and she'd no reason to be there. She was sat with her back to the door and he could see her shoulders heaving. He paused in the doorway as his ears registered the sound of soft sobs. Should he go to her, or would doing so embarrass her? He only thought for a moment before concluding that she had come here, to the office they shared, for a reason. She knew he'd still be here. Did she â€| _need _him? Could she possibly?

He approached her carefully, coming to stand in front of her. "Isobel â€| are you all right?"

She swiped at her tears and the corners of her mouth lifted infinitesimally at his use of her first name. So far had they come from that first meeting of _Doctor Clarkson _and _Mrs. Crawley_. He was her closest confidant now, and she, his.

He reached into the pocket of his lab coat and withdrew a clean handkerchief. She accepted it with a watery smile and dabbed at her eyes.

"Thank you, Richard. I'm sure you're wondering why I'm here as, I suppose, am I." She looked up at him, and the way he leaned against his desk and folded his arms across his chest caused her to smile in spite of herself. It was a mannerism of his that told her he was intent on listening, whatever she might have to say.

"It's your office as much as mine," he said with a shrug, "but you're not due in again until Friday so yes, I was a bit unsettled to find you here in tears. Can I help?" At his question the both of them chuckled. He sounded so very much like _her_. Her influence was making its mark upon him.

"'Unsettled' is the perfect word," she began with a shake of her head. "I'm afraid I've allowed Cousin Violet to get the better of me."

"_No!"_ he gasped, feigning shock. It lightened the mood and she flashed him a genuine smile.

"I know ... It's hard to believe." Isobel sighed. "But this time she went a bridge too far, insisting that in taking Ethel into my employ I'm calling down scandal upon the entire Crawley family. I know I can be caustic, Richard, but she doesn't _think _at all before she speaks!"

Richard knew that the plight of Ethel Parks was a cause close to Isobel's heart. He was aware of her relentless pursuit of the young woman, of the many attempts she had made to help secure a future for little Charlie. She'd told him how it had broken her heart to watch Ethel kiss her son goodbye; that, had she known it would end that way, she'd have thought better of involving the Bryants at all. She had been determined to find a way for the young mother to play a part in her little boy's life and, truth be told, Isobel simply liked Ethel. Admired her for her courage, for the humility she'd come to possess in facing up to the consequences of her ill-advised choices.

"I don't mean to absolve Lady Grantham of her impertinence," Richard said carefully, "but I'm sure that she's still grieving mightily the loss of Lady Sybil. You'd do well to overlook any excessive vitriol on her part. But Isobel â€¦" He paused, waiting until her eyes met his. "This is not about your sullyng the Crawleys' good name â€¦ Heaven knows they can do that all on their own. You are the only one who has been willing to give Miss Parks a chance. If you hadn't taken an interest in her, who would have? She would never have had the confidence to try for the job in Cheadle had you not believed in her."

She dabbed her eyes again and heaved a sigh of relief. "This is why I came here," she said. "I needed to know if my motivations were right concerning Ethel. All that I wanted was for her to have a chance at a better life for herself and her son. But all that I've heard is that my meddling is an inconvenience. I suppose I'd begun to believe it myself."

Richard shook his head. "Never, Isobel. We should all share your level of concern for the good of humanity."

Twentieth October, 1920: the day Richard realized that Isobel's happiness was his happiness, her sorrow, his sorrow, and her passion, his own.

End
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